

“Do you really enjoy the modern play?”: Beckett on commercial television

Book or Report Section

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0

Open access

Bignell, J. (2019) “Do you really enjoy the modern play?”:
Beckett on commercial television. In: Stewart, P. and Pattie,
D. (eds.) Pop Beckett: Intersections with Popular Culture.
Samuel Beckett in Company, 7. Ibidem, Stuttgart, pp. 63-84.
ISBN 9783838211930 Available at
<http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86667/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: Ibidem

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law,
including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other
copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in
the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



Pop

Beckett

Intersections with Popular Culture

Paul Stewart,
David Pattie (eds.)



SAMUEL BECKETT
IN COMPANY, vol. 6

ibidem

Jonathan Bignell

**“Do You Really Enjoy the Modern Play?”:
Beckett on
Commercial Television**

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

DOI: 10.24216/9783838211930_03

© *ibidem*-Verlag / *ibidem* Press

Stuttgart, Germany 2020



Lizenziert unter / Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

s. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

You are free to:

- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Under the following terms:

- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.
- NoDerivatives — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

“Do You Really Enjoy the Modern Play?”: Beckett on Commercial Television

Jonathan Bignell

Television was the key popular medium of the second half of the twentieth century in the UK, and Beckett's work was consistently aired by the BBC, the British non-commercial TV broadcaster that had already featured his work on radio since the mid-1950s (Bignell 2009). Beckett had a consistent presence in the mass media; in that sense radio and television created a 'pop Beckett' simply by making some of his work accessible to a diverse national public. The BBC had been the sole national radio network since 1922 and began a television service in 1936, with a remit to make programmes that offered variety and interest for all sectors of the national audience. Its licence to broadcast, awarded by government, gave it autonomy as long as it acted as a public service and carried out a duty to inform, educate and entertain (Scannell 1990). As well as making news, sport, comedy and music programmes, the BBC commissioned new plays and adapted literature and drama, including work by Beckett. His radio drama *All That Fall* was broadcast in 1957 and published in the same year (1957a), and many of his original and adapted works appeared on radio thereafter (Addyman et al. 2017). However, these dramas were aired on the Third Programme, a BBC radio channel established in 1946 specifically for arts and culture (Whitehead 1989), leaving the territory of dance music, comedy, drama serials and news to the BBC's Light Programme and Home Service radio channels. On radio, Beckett's work was associated with demanding, elite culture rather than provision of what is now called 'popular culture'.

Nevertheless, Beckett's drama was also on BBC television quite often, thanks to support from BBC producers and directors including Michael Bakewell, Barbara Bray, Martin Esslin and Donald McWhinnie, each of whom knew him personally and had great respect for his work (Knowlson 1996). But it was never popular in the

sense that a lot of people liked it (Bignell 2009, 180-182). Popularity has several meanings in a television context (Bignell 2010), but in an industrial and commercial sense the term can refer either to sheer viewer numbers (the ratings for a specific programme), or to a broadcaster's performance relative to its competitors (the audience share that is attracted to one broadcaster's output rather than another's at a specific moment). To take the example of the first of Beckett's theatre plays adapted for television, *Waiting for Godot* (1957b) was broadcast on BBC TV in 1961 but attracted only 5 per cent of the UK population, compared to 22 per cent who watched the commercial ITV channel that evening instead (BBC 1961). Not surprisingly, perhaps, Beckett's play was not a ratings hit.

Popularity can also refer to the value attached by viewers to TV programmes, and here too Beckett's work did not fare well on the BBC. The BBC's Audience Research department not only collected data about the number of viewers watching its programmes by surveying a representative sample of viewers and multiplying the results to reflect the whole national audience, but it also allocated a score for appreciation based on the reactions of its sample viewers. This Reaction Index for the BBC's *Godot* was 32 out of 100, well below the average of 66 for BBC plays in early 1961 (BBC 1961). Two of Beckett's theatre plays were adapted for the BBC's *Festival* (1963-4) and *Thirty Minute Theatre* (1965-73) TV anthologies in the 1960s and 1970s, each of which were seasons of prime-time evening dramas in which an adaptation of a different theatre text was screened each episode. When *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959) was on BBC TV in 1963 as part of *Festival* the audience was small and viewers' reactions were generally unfavourable. Only 8 per cent of the UK population was watching and the Reaction Index was again a dismal 32 (BBC 1963). Beckett's work was not building up an expanding audience nor one that became more enthusiastic about his plays.

Beckett's first drama written specifically for the TV medium, *Eh Joe* (1967), was screened in July 1966 on BBC2, the BBC's recently launched second channel that offered alternatives to the mainstream schedule. It aired experimental satire, opera, wildlife docu-

mentaries and science fiction, for example, to complement the output of BBC1. The audience report on *Eh Joe* (BBC 1966) estimated its viewership as 3 per cent of the national audience, and the Reaction Index was 49, some dozen or so points below the figures achieved by BBC's more conventional dramas. One of the sample viewers of *Eh Joe* commented, for example, that "I like plays with proper sets, not a bed and a couple of doors covered by curtains" (BBC 1966). Even so, the BBC remained Beckett's main patron, pursuing its public service mission despite such criticisms. Although the BBC's Beckett plays gave him an ongoing profile in popular culture inasmuch as he regularly featured in the broadcast media, his work did not achieve much popularity.

But it is not generally known that extracts from Beckett's work and features about his drama, if not complete plays, also appeared on Independent Television, the commercially-funded British television channel set up in 1955 to rival BBC (Johnson and Turnock 2005). ITV was funded by advertising, which meant that its success depended on making programmes that drew substantial audiences for the thirty-second commercials for consumer goods that were inserted into its programmes approximately every fifteen minutes. Popularity was fundamental to the channel's very existence. The advertising was mainly for mass-market commodities such as household cleaning products, petrol, cigarettes, toothpaste or confectionary. ITV was not a single company, but a federation of regional broadcasting franchises in different parts of the country. There were different ITV companies serving London, the Midlands, the North, Wales and Scotland, for example. In the most lucrative advertising market, the London area, there was one franchise holder for weekdays and another for weekends. Each franchise holder made programmes for the parts of the day's TV schedule that were available only to its own regional audience, and also competed to get its programmes into the parts of the day given over to the national ITV schedule. The most desirable parts of the day for advertising were evenings, because that was when the largest numbers of potential viewers were at home and available to watch. In those prime-time

hours, when most of the programmes were broadcast to the whole nation rather than just one region, only a limited number of programme slots were available. Below, this chapter focuses on a specific instance when Beckett's work appeared on ITV in the relatively neglected Sunday daytime schedule, but it was there as part of ITV's national output.

The channel relied on imported American thrillers and Westerns, genres with plenty of action and fast-moving storylines, as well as British-made programmes in popular genres, like the hospital drama *Emergency Ward 10* (1957-67) the live variety (vaudeville) spectacular *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* (1955-67) and the game show *Take Your Pick* (1955-68), for example. However, companies holding ITV franchises had to demonstrate their success at fulfilling their public service remit in order to have their lucrative contracts renewed. Despite its primary remit to make money for its shareholders, requiring ITV companies to get as many viewers as possible with popular programmes, the channel had the same legal duty as the BBC to cater to a range of different audiences, and to offer a range of types of programme that would provide news, current affairs, religious programmes, documentary and serious drama as well as the entertainment that would attract large audiences. From a purely economic perspective, as BBC's experience with his plays showed, Beckett's work was not likely to be an attractive weapon in ITV's campaign to win large national audiences with accessible, entertaining programmes.

The Pilkington Report (1962), an inquiry into ITV's performance over its first five years of existence ordered by the British Government, critiqued ITV for the downmarket programming that it used to attract large audiences for its advertisers. Making serious drama and programmes about the arts was a means to counter these criticisms, enabling ITV to assert the channel's cultural credentials in competition with the BBC. Broadcasting cutting-edge contemporary drama was also a way for individual ITV franchise-holders to compete with each other on grounds of programme quality (Gardner and

Wyver 1983). Beckett was among the dramatists that ITV tried to bring onto the commercial channel.

In 1960, BBC and ITV competed to make a television version of *Godot*. Michael Barry, the BBC's Head of Drama for TV, wrote a memo to the Controller of Programmes in which he warned that ITV was seeking broadcast rights to several works by contemporary playwrights that the BBC also planned to adapt (Barry 1960). In the context of intense competition between the BBC and the relative newcomer ITV that challenged the BBC's monopoly of the airwaves, legal rights to broadcast a new drama for television or a new adaptation of a theatre text would always be exclusively granted to one broadcaster and not the other. Alongside approaches to Harold Pinter, Doris Lessing, M.F. Simpson and Arnold Wesker, Barry had discovered that ITV was also courting Beckett. Barry reported that there had been "an offer by one of the contracting companies", in other words by one of the regional ITV franchise holders. Barry offered Beckett's agent a relatively substantial fee of £200, later raised to £250, to secure *Godot* for the BBC. The BBC managed to retain Beckett and made the 1961 drama discussed above. The desire for prestige and competitive advantage, as well as the aim to make good programmes, led to ITV companies courting contemporary playwrights and seeking out high-profile cultural work to present in television form. A few years after ITV failed to sign Beckett up to allow a television adaptation of *Godot*, however, ITV did make two programmes about the play and included performances of extracts from it.

Modern plays

The commercial ABC TV company, an ITV franchise holder now perhaps best known for the pop spy-adventure series *The Avengers* (1961-9) and the talent show *Opportunity Knocks* (1964-8), also made the series *The Present Stage* for the national ITV commercial network in 1966, with two episodes about *Waiting for Godot*. The actual programmes do not survive in any archive, but this is not very surprising

(O'Dwyer 2008). Even though videotape was being used to make programmes from 1958 onwards, when both the BBC and ITV acquired the Ampex telerecording machines first introduced in the USA in 1956, few programmes were made on tape—most were broadcast live—and even fewer were preserved. One reason was that the reels of tape were expensive and producers routinely wiped the master copies and re-used the tape for another programme. There was little point in keeping programmes anyhow, because the contracts governing programme ownership normally stipulated that programmes could be shown only twice. New legal negotiations had to be undertaken to retain rights to rebroadcast programmes in numerous repeats, such as is done today. Only programmes with strong export potential that would give them a long life and significant economic value, or with a high cultural profile that might make them seem of historical importance, were archived. The BBC's *Eh Joe*, for example, was made on videotape in the same year as *The Present Stage* and preserved because of Beckett's status, but in the mid-1960s this was exceptional. *The Present Stage* was not a high-profile or potentially lucrative programme for ABC, so it joined the huge number of videotaped programmes that are now considered 'lost'.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to discover quite a lot about how *The Present Stage* showcased Beckett to ITV's popular audience in the summer of 1966. This chapter has already discussed the institutional context of the programme and how it relates to its producers' intentions in the context of competition with the BBC and between ITV's regional franchise holders. Published sources such as ITV's publicity material, and the book on which the series was based are discussed below to illuminate the aims of the series and its approach to Beckett's drama in particular. The on-screen contributors to the programme, notably the theatre director and actors working on extracts from the published script of *Godot*, had particular backgrounds and skills that would have shaped how the play was interpreted and realized. All television programmes are also framed by the schedule of other programmes in which they are embedded and to which they relate in a variety of ways. Below, this chapter considers

how the programme preceding *The Present Stage* might have contrasted with, but also shared qualities with, the presentation of contemporary drama for viewers at the time. While a detailed audio-visual analysis of *The Present Stage* would be invaluable, much can be learned about the significance of its programmes about *Godot* from other sources. Indeed, this paratextual, historiographic approach is important and interesting in itself, as work on the reception of Beckett has shown (Nixon and Feldman 2009).

The *TV Times* listings magazine ran a feature announcing the series (Anon. 1966b), which opened by asking “Do you really enjoy the modern play like *Look Back in Anger* or *Waiting for Godot*?” The implied answer was no, and the series was promoted as a means for viewers to gain access to material that was off-putting or even incomprehensible. As we have seen, the BBC’s experience with Beckett was that his work was felt by viewers to be challenging and puzzling. John Kershaw, the ITV series’ creator, commented: “I am hoping that this series will make modern drama interesting to people who perhaps never get the chance to go to the theatre.” ABC’s policy was to use its weekend daytime hours to offer something that would appeal to each member of a household, often targeting particular age-groups, genders or specific leisure interests. One such audience segment was people aware of contemporary drama and interested in it, but who were confused by how to make sense of the plays they saw or read about in the press.

The weekend daytime schedule included several hours of informal educational programmes for adults, religious services on Sundays, and children’s programmes, sports coverage, drama and entertainment. *The Present Stage* was made for the mixed roster of Sunday programmes and was a contribution by ABC to the national ITV output. Although ABC held the ITV franchise for the Midlands of Britain, with offices in Birmingham and Manchester, it also maintained a base near London so that actors and celebrities from the capital could easily get to its studios to make programmes. This was to be significant for the personnel making the programmes about *Godot*. There was a widespread mythology enfolded a supposed rev-

olution in theatre centred around the London stage (Russell Taylor 1969). London had the predominant place in British theatre culture, but of course only a minority of the British population could see live performances there, for reasons of affordability as well as geography, and probably also a sense of social exclusion. It was these problems of access that Kershaw aimed to remedy by means of *The Present Stage* when he referred to “people who perhaps never get the chance to go to the theatre”. There was an aspect of public service to this, in which one of the socially valuable functions of television broadcasting was understood to be its role in broadening viewers’ cultural horizons and deepening their knowledge. Elite expertise and specialist knowledge could be made available to everyone, and despite the implicit paternalism of this view it gave rise to ambitious and distinctive programmes.

In 1966, almost all British homes would have owned one television set, positioned in the main living room and acting as the focal point of most families’ everyday leisure time. In June and July, warm weather would have meant that activities like gardening, visiting parks and meeting friends competed with *The Present Stage* and the programmes around it for potential viewers’ attention on Sundays. However, shopping, the major household activity on Saturdays, did not distract potential viewers because British shops (and cinemas, theatres and restaurants) were all closed by law on Sundays until the evening. This enforced relaxation on Sunday daytimes created potentially positive opportunities for familial bonding and developing leisure pursuits and hobbies, but it also gave Sundays an empty, desultory aspect. Programmes about Beckett’s drama in Sunday daytime would be perceived very differently from similar programmes on weekday evenings, because of the different relationships between television and the activities of the household at that time in the week.

ABC had staked a claim to serious drama on Sunday evenings before *Godot* appeared in its daytime programmes. The *Armchair Theatre* (1956-74) series of specially-commissioned dramas for television was the most prominent drama slot on television, at least until the mid-1960s (Macmurrough-Kavanagh and Lacey 1999). Its

producer, Howard Thomas, was a highly-regarded ABC executive with a background in the cinema business, who led *Armchair Theatre*'s development of drama written specifically for the television medium (Thomas 1959). Each week a new play was shot in the studio with actors performing live in story sequence, like theatre, though without a live audience. Three or four electronic video cameras pirouetted around the performers and the cameras' different points of view were cut together during the broadcast. ABC commissioned notable playwrights to write for *Armchair Theatre*, like David Mercer, Alun Owen and Harold Pinter, and its writers also adapted existing theatre texts by Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg.

The plays were screened in prime-time on Sunday evenings, and were regularly featured in the national press because of their daring contemporaneity in language, subject and form. They were high-profile productions and gained large audiences for ITV. For example, the Associated-Rediffusion (A-R) ITV company serving London on weekdays commissioned a television version of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1963), broadcast nationally in 1960 just two years after its stage premiere, in the regular series *Play of the Week*. The drama was very popular, gaining an audience of 11 million, placing it among the most-watched programmes of the week (Billington 2007, 110). ABC made Pinter's *A Night Out* (1963) for *Armchair Theatre* in 1964, and A-R and another ITV company, Granada, commissioned five original drama and adapted theatre plays from Pinter in the years preceding *The Present Stage* (Bignell 2018). While there is no guarantee that *Godot* would have attracted audiences as large as those for Pinter's plays, which are less demanding formally than Beckett's, if A-R had been able to lure Beckett away from the BBC his work would perhaps have complemented ITV's largely successful strategies to make contemporary drama popular.

The plays featured in *The Present Stage* had been landmarks of British theatre in the decade preceding the series, and each had been published in inexpensive editions, in the Methuen Modern Plays series, Penguin paperbacks, Faber paperback or a Samuel French acting script. Alongside *Waiting for Godot* the series dealt with John

Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1957), Arnold Wesker's *Roots* (1960), *The Fire Raisers* (1962) by Max Frisch, *The Bald Prima Donna* by Eugene Ionesco (1958) and Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960). These were plays that were easily obtainable to read, had made a public impact mainly through reviews in newspapers and were available for production by amateur theatre groups. The plays were already 'modern classics' and although they may have seemed inaccessible because of their form, language or themes, they were not unavailable to people who wished to find out about them. Interesting a potential viewer and making the link between the viewer and the theatre text or performance was the aim of Kershaw's series. *The Present Stage* was a form of popularisation.

The roster of personnel making *The Present Stage* reveals that the programme was an odd hybrid. It was produced by Pamela Lonsdale who normally made religious programmes, and she adopted a somewhat lofty and proselytising tone when *TV Times* reported her annoyance about the potential audience's attitude to contemporary dramas: "These people immediately label them as a lot of rubbish with no beginning, no end and no plot. Even my own mother has done it" (Anon. 1966). Clearly the challenge for the production team was to find an appropriate tone, form and mode of address to an audience who they assumed would be initially reluctant to engage with their work.

The role of director was taken by Wojciech Szendzikowski (known as Voytek, a nickname given him by the theatre director George Devine), who was émigré avant-garde stage, film and television designer. He designed over 40 *Armchair Theatre* productions, and Roman Polanski's film *Cul-de-Sac* (1966), for example. Voytek was not as skilled as a director, and the need for *The Present Stage* to make space for impromptu performance extracts from six different plays across its run of episodes meant that there were limited opportunities for visual stylisation. The concept for the realisation of *The Present Stage* was much like a drama workshop, in which the skills of the actors and the ideas introduced by Kershaw could be tried-out in an informal spirit of inquiry.

For each play, there were two TV episodes in *The Present Stage*. The first was about that week's play's form and themes, and the second aimed to explain how the play works dramatically, using a consistent company of performers to bring moments of the drama to life. Of course, the possibility of making the programme depended on having rights to quote and perform extracts from Beckett's text. Beckett often refused permission to perform cut, altered or adapted versions of his plays, and this stance was vigorously enforced by his literary agent Curtis Brown (Bignell 2015). However, Beckett did agree to the use of extracts in programmes with an informal educational agenda, including *The Present Stage*. Coincidentally, the BBC made a midweek arts series in the same year, *The Theatre Today* (BBC 1966), which featured extracts from *Godot* in its 17 March episode, for example, and the two-minute piece of *Godot* on videotape was then re-broadcast as part of another BBC series, *Seeing and Believing*, on 15 May 1966 (Anon. 1966). The Curtis Brown agency agreed to this use of extracts and charged the BBC £3 per minute each time the clips were shown. *Seeing and Believing* was another of the Sunday daytime programmes, transmitted live from a London church on the BBC1 channel from 11.00-11.30 am. It was a religious series, with a topic around which discussion and illustrative extracts were organised, and that week the theme was waiting, for which the *Godot* extract would have seemed appropriate.

The director working on screen with the actors in *The Present Stage* was David Jones, whose career spanned prestigious publicly-funded theatre work and the most high-profile television arts programmes of the mid-1960s (Billington 2008). His track record and links with significant writers, actors, producers and directors fitted him very well to interpret and explore the dramaturgy of contemporary British and European plays for a diverse audience. A Cambridge University graduate, Jones was an assistant to the BBC producer Huw Wheldon from 1958-64 on the arts programme *Monitor* (BBC 1958-65). The series profiled past and present cultural figures and included short documentary features filmed by rising young directors including Ken Russell and John Schlesinger. Jones succeeded

Wheldon and produced *Monitor* in the 1963-64 season. *Monitor* is rightly regarded as a high-point in BBC's mission to inform and educate mass television audiences about a wide range of cultural production, in art, music, cinema, literature and theatre. Jones's work behind the camera on the programme would have proven his credentials to ABC when planning *The Present Stage*.

Jones complemented his work at the BBC with theatre directing, including Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* in a trio of short plays he directed at the Mermaid Theatre in London in 1961 alongside T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932) and W.B. Yeats's *Purgatory* (1939). Jones had an abiding interest in the progressive, experimental drama being done in London, and developed a relationship with Harold Pinter that began when Jones played McCann in an amateur production of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in 1959 (Billington 2008). At this time the Royal Shakespeare Company did not have its own venue in Stratford-upon-Avon but worked at the Arts Theatre and then the Aldwych Theatre in London's West End. Jones became the RSC's Artistic Controller in 1964, working with the company's Artistic Director, Peter Hall, who directed *Godot* in its British premiere at the Arts Theatre in 1955. Jones's role was to curate seasons of new writing and existing plays by European authors (Anon. 2008). His task of working on the challenges posed by staging *Godot* and the other plays in *The Present Stage* exploited his broad practical knowledge of modern drama as performed in the vibrant London theatre culture of the period.

The actors in the *Godot* episodes were Valentine Palmer, Barry Stanton, Paul Hardwick and Derek Smith. Hardwick had appeared on television in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* on BBC in 1962, and an RSC version of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in 1963, each performed on stage at the Aldwych Theatre, and he probably knew David Jones. Similarly, Smith had been in the television adaptation of the RSC's *The Comedy of Errors* by Shakespeare on BBC in 1964 and was part of the same London theatre milieu. By contrast, *The Present Stage* was not prestige drama in evening prime-time, like the BBC's screenings

of Shakespeare, its adaptations of Beckett's Royal Court Theatre successes or ITV's commissions for *Armchair Theatre* or *Play of the Week*. Nevertheless, the performers working on extracts from *Godot* were experienced, highly-trained and professional, as required by the series' exploration of plays by six different writers in just a few hours of screen time.

The Present Stage TV series was based on the eponymous book by Kershaw (1966), which was structured in much the same way, with two short chapters about each play. Kershaw first explained his view that audience involvement and engagement with actors' bodily and gestural movement enliven drama in ways that the literary study of plays or the analysis of deliberately alienating styles of performance cannot. He emphasised how theatre space could be used to create non-Naturalistic fictional worlds, paralleling the use of back-stage action versus front-of-stage direct address to the audience in Shakespeare's theatre with the use of deep focus, background action and close-up in contemporary television and film. The relationships between framing, bodily expressivity and the dynamics of audience attention that Kershaw stresses seem to lend his approach to uses of the television medium that explore its potentialities in themselves, as well as in their aptitude for adapting and representing theatre drama.

Kershaw's analyses of Beckett began with the assertion that *Godot* was undoubtedly the most important play of the previous ten years. He described the structure of the play and its plot, inasmuch as it has one, and outlined some of the allusions and verbal tricks that Beckett uses in the text. Kershaw was particularly interested in the biblical resonances of the language, and the use of vaudeville comedy alongside philosophical, existential questions. Farce, he argued, "helps Vladimir, Estragon and us to bear the wretchedness of how we live and what we face. Laughter is distracting and, at the same time, a most powerful underliner" (1966, 119). The analysis is relatively simple, but wide-ranging, and a lot of space in the book, and thus presumably a lot of time in the television series, was given over to presenting relatively lengthy passages from the play. The subtle

patterns of Beckett's verbal imagery, and the changing pace in the delivery of exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon, were used to invite audiences to feel and appreciate mood, tone and characterisation rather than to offer an interpretation of the play's overall meaning.

The book of the series was reviewed for *Modern Drama* in 1967 by Malcolm Page, then a young lecturer at Simon Fraser University in Canada. As befits a popularising text published to accompany a television series, Fraser described the book as "a fairly elementary introduction to drama of the last 10 years" (Fraser 1967, 325). Interestingly, he described *Godot* (with *The Bald Prima Donna*) as a French play, alongside its three British and one German companions. For Page (1967, 326), Kershaw's discussion of *Godot* was one of the weaker parts of the book, and he called the two Beckett chapters "inconclusive" and decided that Kershaw "seems unsure why he admires Beckett and Frisch". Indeed, in his conclusion to the book, Kershaw offers only relatively anodyne analysis of contemporary theatre as a whole. He suggests that "we are beginning to live, now, not by rules we inherit but by values we discover for ourselves" (1966, 131). In refusing former ideologies, social conventions and conventions of representation, Kershaw suggests, "art can extend and deepen human experience" (1966, 133). This was scarcely a controversial view in 1966, and the substance of Kershaw's study is much less significant than the fact of his having three full hours of national television to develop his case by a combination of lecture and practical demonstration. The medium was more important than his message.

Aspiration and self-improvement

The public service ethos of British broadcasting included the requirement for broadcasters to inform and educate, as well as entertain. For example, BBC radio had been broadcasting to schools since 1924, and television had been used to make educational programmes, connected directly to curriculum subjects, since 1957.

Rather than the BBC, it was the ITV franchise holder for London on weekdays, Associated-Rediffusion, that started the initiative though there were few schools that had access to television sets on their premises. There were no programmes about Beckett's work in the schools broadcast output, though there were productions of dramas from Ancient Greece to the early twentieth century (Wrigley 2018). But both BBC and ITV discussed Beckett's work and presented extracts from his plays in the parallel, informal provision of cultural programmes that they screened outside of educational broadcasting as such and outside the most popular timeslots. Sunday daytimes were neither the valuable prime-time evening period, the popular children's viewing periods of weekday afternoons after school ended, nor the Saturday afternoon period when live football games were shown. Sunday daytime was a neglected part of the schedule in which a varied and interesting miscellany of content appeared.

On Sundays, ITV programmes began with a church service at 11.00 in the morning, followed by two programmes aiming to help viewers learn French and Russian. This instructional tone continued, but now more befitting the embourgeoisement and increasing prosperity of the period, with *The ABC of Do It Yourself* in which skilled handyman Barry Bucknell showed viewers how to do home improvements. As the title of the series suggests, it was intended as a primer or instructional guide to the common tasks that a household-er in 1966 might face. It was assumed that the viewer had the relatively small amount of surplus income and leisure time required to make improvements to his (or, less plausibly in those days, her) domestic space. In the introduction to the accompanying book to the series, published in association with ABC TV as a paperback at the price of 3s 6d, Bucknell (1966, 5) aligns himself with the ordinary man:

You may have become involved with do-it-yourself activities for a number of reasons. It may well be a form of relaxation doing something which is creative and which is quite different from your normal occupation. It is of course quite likely that you were

forced into it by economics, that you just have to do it yourself to save money. There is always the possibility that your wife chivied [sic] you into it, or you may have been shamed into it by the efforts of your neighbours.

Bucknell began the series by introducing viewers to the range of basic tools that the home handymen might require. Then in each episode, he addressed a common type of do-it-yourself challenge, such as repairs to household electric lighting, plumbing, curing damp in plaster, painting and decorating, hanging wallpaper and laying linoleum flooring. Bucknell himself demonstrated each task, addressing the viewer and talking about the job as he carried it out, with the studio cameras providing close-ups of particular details and techniques. Like other TV programmes in ITV's Sunday informal educational schedule, *The ABC of Do It Yourself* recognised common problems, needs and desires, and imparted technical skills and professional competencies communicable to ordinary viewers. Television was a means to identify and recognise problems and offer practical ways to address them. It was this attitude that underlay the approach that Kershaw took to the appreciation of contemporary drama in *The Present Stage*.

ITV's first half-hour programme on *Waiting for Godot* was at 1.45 pm on 26 June 1966, when most viewers would have watched while they ate their traditional Sunday lunch of roast meat, potato and green vegetables. It followed Bucknell's evaluation of a range of different kinds of floor covering including linoleum and vinyl tiles, and a demonstration of the techniques for laying carpet. The following week's episode of *The Present Stage* on 3 July, including extracts from *Godot*, was preceded by Bucknell's advice on making concrete paths, and laying crazy paving for a garden patio. Viewers might have chosen to watch the competing programme on BBC1 that afternoon (there was no broadcasting on BBC2 at that time of day), but detailed ratings information is not available to us now. However, the rival channel's *Gardening Club* (1.30 pm) with advice about growing tomatoes, followed by *Farming* (1.50 pm), about beef production in

Yugoslavia, probably did not present a serious challenge to *The Present Stage*. Attentive viewers might have noted that the day after the second *Godot* episode, Beckett's *Eh Joe* could be seen on the BBC. It would have been inconceivable, however, that any reference to a competing channel's programmes would be made to help ITV's viewers make this connection. Moreover, *Eh Joe* was not prominent in the BBC schedule, being screened at 10.20 pm on the minority BBC2 channel. Nevertheless, the coincidence of the BBC screening Beckett the day after *The Present Stage* potentially drew additional viewers to Beckett's work.

Moreover, in a broader sense, ITV's programmes on that Sunday afternoon looked forward optimistically to the future. Bucknell concluded the published version of *The ABC of Do It Yourself* with some observations on how new materials, especially plastics, were transforming the British household and the infrastructure and decoration with which Bucknell was especially concerned:

if you enjoy doing it yourself, it not only pays to keep a close watch on all modern developments but with the increasing range of materials which open up exciting new design possibilities, it is also worth while developing a flair for artistic design. This comes with familiarity.

The value of *The Present Stage* was, in much the same way, to inform the viewer about new ways of doing theatre, and the new techniques that staging contemporary plays could demand. For Bucknell and Kershaw this was partly a matter of understanding how the structure and components of a kitchen tap or *Waiting for Godot* worked in a practical context. It meant taking the play or the domestic appliance apart to see how it worked, then putting it back together. But moreover, it meant learning to exercise taste, how to appreciate design and style, and how to take part in a culture that might initially seem alien or forbidding. With Kershaw or Bucknell as their guides, ITV viewers in 1966 were being given access to activities and experiences that were hitherto barred to them. Going to see a con-

temporary play and being able to discuss it, or removing outdated Victorian features from a house in order to install modern panelling, were more comparable than they might at first appear. Bucknell (1966, 156) explained how newly found expertise could become a naturalized aspect of a more confident and independent social self:

When you're doing your own decorating and your own construction you naturally become more critical of bad design and more appreciative of good design. Your appreciation of simplicity, harmony, balance and dramatic effect is increased and you become better qualified to make your own decisions on design. This means that with the knowledge of the basic principles of do-it-yourself, with the modern materials and techniques at your disposal, and with an eye for design, the satisfaction known to centuries of craftsman should be within your grasp.

By drawing attention to the ways in which a theatre play might be performed, albeit in the context of a television studio, using the technical resources and alternations of point of view that the multi-camera video environment made possible, a secondary agenda for Kershaw was to bring a wider range of playwrights to the television medium. Having interviewed Kershaw prior to the broadcast of the first episode of *The Present Stage*, *TV Times* (Anon. 1966, 7) reported his concern that playwrights were not taking advantage of opportunities that television offered for presenting their works. In addition to the general audience for Sunday daytime television on ITV, Kershaw hoped that the much more limited constituency of working playwrights might be inspired to offer their theatre ideas for adaptation, or perhaps craft original television drama. This is a particular variant of the discourse of empowerment, opportunity and acquisition of skills that public service broadcasting on Sundays in Britain adopted.

This chapter has taken a historiographic and contextual approach to the appearance of *Godot* on Sunday daytime commercial television. By analysing matters of scheduling, audience address,

paratextual materials and relationships between Beckett's play and adjacent, comparable texts the chapter has evaluated what it meant for the ITV commercial channel to make programmes about Beckett's drama. Although it may seem incongruous, *Godot* did relate in various ways to the televised church services and home improvement advice that framed it on ITV in 1966. Moreover, the commercial network evidently cared whether its viewers understood cutting-edge drama by Beckett, Ionesco or Pinter. Although *The Present Stage* was not a high-profile, prime-time, mass audience programme, it recognised Beckett's significance for British arts culture at the time, and connected with other ways in which Beckett was visible on television. These included the more well-known television dramatizations of his theatre work, plays he wrote specifically for television, and arts coverage of Beckett at a time when he was a living, internationally recognized writer making new work. By moving outwards from the example of *The Present Stage*, it is possible to place Beckett's drama in the context of a time of dynamic and exciting instability in British culture, when the categories of the popular and the elite were being contested. Curiosity, aspiration and a desire for self-improvement were implicit in how ITV addressed its Sunday viewers in the summer of 1966, and Beckett was a part of that initiative. In a small way, *The Present Stage's* focus on Beckett's work contributed to a cultural revolution.

References

- Addyman, David, Matthew Feldman and Erik Tønning (eds.) 2017. *Samuel Beckett and BBC Radio: A Reassessment*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Anon. 1966a. BBC Copyright Department memo: *The Theatre Today*, March 17, Samuel Beckett Copyright File 1, 1965-69, BBC Written Archives Centre, RCONT 18.
- Anon. 1996b "And now—how to enjoy plays". *TV Times*. April 16, 1966. 7.

- Anon. 2008. David Jones: theatre, television and film director. *The Times*, September 24. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/david-jones-theatre-television-and-film-director-bqd7wt527ng>.
- Barry, Michael. 1960. Memo to Controller of Programmes: TV, August 23, 1960, Samuel Beckett Drama Writers file 1960-74, BBC Written Archives Centre, T48/74/1.
- BBC. 1961. Audience Research Report on *Waiting for Godot*, June 26, 1961, BBC Written Archives Centre, R/9/7/52.
- BBC. 1963. Audience Research Report on *Krapp's Last Tape*, November 13, 1963, BBC Written Archives Centre, R/9/7/63.
- BBC. 1966. Audience Research Report on *Eb, Joe*, November, 1966, BBC Written Archives Centre, T5/1296/1.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1957a. *All That Fall. A Play for Radio*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1967. *Eb Joe and Other Writings*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1959. *Krapp's Last Tape and Embers*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1957b *Waiting for Godot*. London: Samuel French.
- Bignell, Jonathan. 2009. *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- . 2015. "Performing right: legal constraints and Beckett's plays on BBC television". *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 27 (2015): 129-142.
- . 2018. "'Random dottiness': Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in 1958". In *Beckett Influencing / Influencing Beckett*, edited by Nicholas Johnson, Anita Rokoczy and Mariko Tanaka. Budapest and Paris: Károli Gáspár University Press / L'Harmattan.
- . 2010. "Television and the popular: viewing from the British perspective". *Journal of Literary Theory*, 4:2 (2010): 181-198.
- Billington, Michael. 2007. *Harold Pinter*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 2008. Obituary: David Jones. *The Guardian*, September 23, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/sep/23/theatre.television>.
- Bucknell, Barry. 1966. *The ABC of Do It Yourself*. London: TV Publications.
- Eliot, T.S. 1932. *Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama*. London: Faber.
- Frisch, Max. 1962. *The Fire Raisers*. London: Methuen.

- Gardner, Carl and John Wyver. 1983. "The Single Play: From Reithian Reverence to Cost-accounting and Censorship". *Screen*, 24:4-5 (1983): 114-124.
- Ionesco, Eugene. 1958. *The Bald Prima Donna*. Trans. Donald Watson. London: Samuel French.
- Johnson, Catherine and Rob Turnock. 2005. "Introduction: approaching the histories of ITV". In *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years*, edited by Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock, 1-12. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kershaw, John. 1966. *The Present Stage: New Directions in Theatre Today*. London: Fontana.
- Knowlson, James. 1996. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Macmuraugh-Kavanagh, Madeleine, and Stephen Lacey. 1999. "Who framed theatre?: The 'moment of change' in British TV drama". *New Theatre Quarterly*, 57 (1999): 58-74.
- Nixon, Mark and Matthew Feldman (eds.). 2009. *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*. London: Continuum.
- O'Dwyer, Andy. 2008. "European television archives and the search for audiovisual sources". In *A European Television History*, edited by Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers. 257-263. New York: Blackwell.
- Osborne, John. 1957. *Look Back in Anger*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Page, Malcolm. 1967. Review of *The Present Stage*. *Modern Drama*, 10:3 (1967): 325-326.
- Pilkington, Hugh. 1962. *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting*. London: HMSO.
- Pinter, Harold. 1960. *The Caretaker*. London: Methuen.
 —. *The Birthday Party*. 1963. London: Methuen. Russell Taylor, John. 1969. *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama*. London: Eyre Methuen.
 —. *A Night Out*. 1963. London: Samuel French.
- Scannell, Paddy. 1990. "Public service broadcasting: The history of a concept". In *Understanding Television*, edited by Andrew Goodwin and Gary Whannel. 11-29. London: Routledge.
- Thomas, Howard (ed.) 1959. *The Armchair Theatre*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Wesker, Arnold. 1960. *Roots*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Whitehead, Kate. 1989. *The Third Programme, A Literary History*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Wrigley, Amanda. 2017. "Tragedy for teens: Ancient Greek tragedy on BBC and ITV schools television in the 1960s". In *Ancient Greece on British Television*, edited by Fiona Hobden and Amanda Wrigley. 84-108. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Yeats, W.B. 1939. *Last Poems and Two Plays*. Dublin: Cuala Press.

